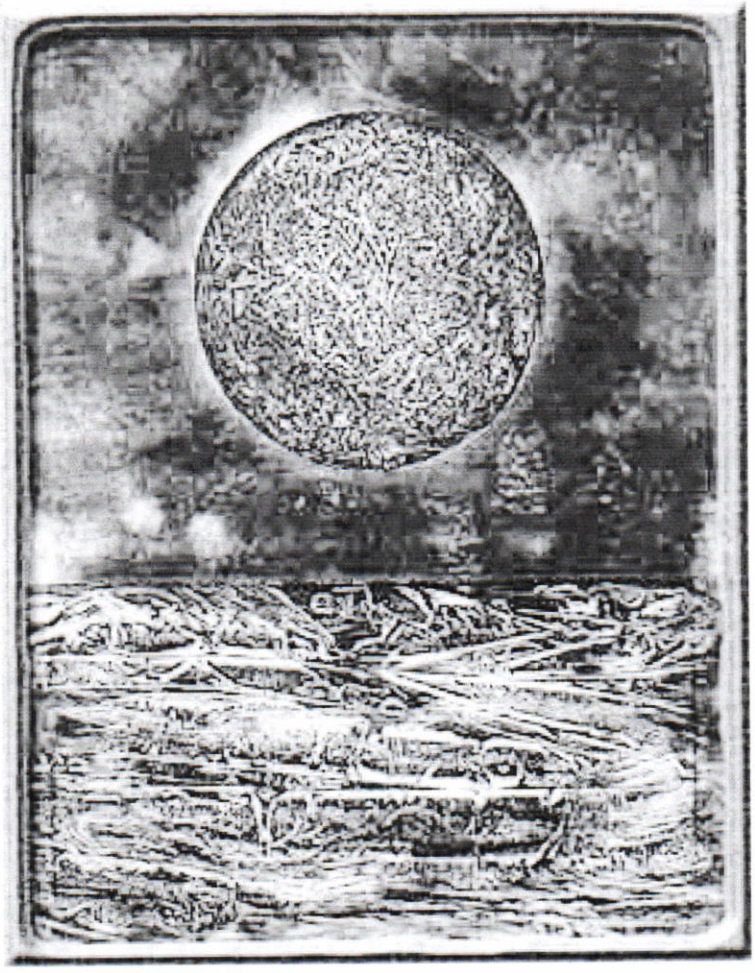
Death of a Small Planet:

It's growth that's killing us

By: Murray Bookchin



We tend to think of environmental catastrophes -such as the recent Exxon Valdez oil-spill disaster in the Bay of Alaska-as "accidents": isolated phenomena that erupt without notice or warning. But when does the word accident become inappropriate? When are such occurrences inevitable rather than accidental? And when does a consistent pattern of inevitable disasters point to a deep-seated crisis that is not only environmental but profoundly social?

President Bush was content to blame the spill of more than ten million gallons of crude petroleum off Valdez Harbor on negligence by a soused sea captain. In fact, however, it was the consequence of social circumstances far more compelling than the usual "human" or "technological" factors cited in mass-media reporting. Since the pipeline at Valdez Harbor went into service a dozen years ago, there have been no fewer than 400 oil spills

in the Bay of Alaska. In 1987, the tanker Stuyvesant dumped almost a million gallons into the gulf after leaving Valdez, presumably because of mechanical failures attributed to severe weather. The environmental - protection organization Greenpeace recorded seven spills in Alaskan waters this year even before the Exxon Valdez ran aground.

Oil spills ranging from a few thousand gallons to a million or more-as well as the oil routinely flushed out of tankers to make room for return-trip cargoes have polluted vast areas of the world's ocean surface and coastline. The appalling effects of oil spills that occurred many years ago are still apparent today, and new incidents keep adding to the damage. The widely publicized 10,000-gallon spill that "mysteriously polluted the coastal areas of two Hawaiian islands a week after the Exxon Valdez ran aground was more than matched by the little-publicized 117,000 gallons that the Exxon Houston dumped off another Hawaiian coastal area some three weeks before the Valdez spill.

On a single day, June 23, 1989, three major spills--off Newport, Rhode Island, in the Delaware River, and on the Texas Gulf Coast--dumped a total of well over one million gallons of oil into U.S. waters

Many find it difficult to see these incidents as part of a continuum that has a common source. To trace a chain of events from its cause to its consequence is an unfamiliar task for people who have been conditioned to see life as a television sit-com or talk show composed of discrete self-contained, anecdotal segments. We live, in effect, on a diet of short takes, devoid of logic or long-range effect. Our problems to the extent that we recognize them as problems at all-are episodic rather than systemic; the scene dissolves, the camera moves on.

But the present crisis will not disappear with a switch of channels. It was predictable-and predicted-decades ago. There is an all-but-forgotten history of dire portents, urgent warnings, and unsuccessful efforts by an earlier generation of environmentalists to deal with the social factors that underpin environmental problems. In many instances, they predicted with uncanny accuracy the results of ecologically insane policies pursued by the corporate establishment in the West and the bureaucratic establishment in the East.

The earliest disputes around the dangers posed by the oil industry's expansion into oceanic drilling occurred even before the Arctic regions were opened to oil exploitation. They go back well into the 1950s, when larger vessels started being used to transport Middle Eastern oil. Long before spills came to public attention, environmentalists were voicing fears over hazards posed by growing tanker capacity.

No less serious than the possibility of "human error" in the operation of these huge vessels was the well-known fact that even the sturdiest ships have a way of being buffeted by storms, drifting off course, foundering on reefs in treacherous waters, and sinking. In lectures I gave decades ago on the Pacifica Radio network, I emphasized the sheer certainty of disastrous oil spills that would surely follow upon the growing size of tankers. The Exxon Valdez spill was, therefore, not an unforeseen accident but a dead certainty-and one that may yet be beggared by others to come. It was as predictable as Three Mile Island and Chernobyl.

No less predictable was the global warming trend. Forecasts that carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels could raise planetary temperatures go back to the Nineteenth Century and have been repeated from time to time since then, though more often as atmospheric curiosities than as serious ecological warnings. I wrote as early as 1964 that increases in the "blanket of carbon dioxide" from fossil-fuel combustion "will lead to more destructive storm patterns and eventually to melting of polar ice caps, rising sea levels, and the inundation of vast land areas."

The possibility of acid rain and the systematic deforestation of the equatorial rain-forest belt, not to speak of the impact of chlorofluorocarbons on the Earth's ozone layer, could not have been foreseen in technical detail. But the larger issue of environmental destruction on a global scale and the disruptions of basic natural cycles was already on the radical agenda in the late 1960s, long before Earth Day was proclaimed and ecological issues were reduced to ridding city streets of cans, bottles, and garbage.

Predictions of disaster come cheap when they are not derived from reasoned analysis of the sort that has become unpopular in this era of New Age mysticism. But we have no reason to rejoice in the fact that Margaret Thatcher often sounds like an environmentally oriented "Green" in her public warnings about the Greenhouse Effect, if we bear in mind that Thatcherism in Britain can often be equated with a transition to high-technology and nucleonics.

Nor would it be particularly encouraging to learn that Mikhail Gorbachev is prepared to follow Thatcher in phasing out the older "rust-belt" industries and their fossil-fuel energy in the aftermath of Chernobyl and earlier, possibly worse nuclear "events" we haven't yet heard much about. If solutions to the Greenhouse Effect create potentially more disastrous problems like the proliferation of "clean," nuclear power and its long-lived radioactive debris, the world may be worse off as a result of this new kind of environmental thinking

Attempts by President Bush to join this chorus by revising the Clean Air Act to reduce high ozone levels, cancer-causing pollutants, and other toxic substances have earned almost as much criticism as praise. The effects of Bush's proposals which are modest enough if we bear in mind the appalling magnitude of the enviro nmental casts-will not be fully felt until the first decade of the next century. Understandably, that has aroused the ire of environmentalists. Moreover, for Bush to leave the execution of his plan to industry is to guarantee that the costs of pollution-control technology will be passed on, with some extras, to the consumer and that many of the proposals will be honored in the breach.

What environmentalists must emphasize is that the global ecological crisis is systemic not simply the product of random mishaps. If the Exxon Valdez disaster is treated merely as an "accident" as were Chernobyl and Three Mile Island-we will have deflected public attention from a social crisis of historic proportions: We do not simply live in a world of

problems but in a highly problematical world, an inherently anti-ecological society. This anti-ecological world will not be healed by acts of statesmanship or passage of piecemeal legislation. It is a world that is direly in need of far-reaching structural change.

Perhaps the most obvious of our systemic problems is uncontrollable growth. I use the word "uncontrollable" advisedly, in preference to "uncontrolled." The growth of which I speak is not humanity's colonization of the planet over millennia of history. It is rather an inexorable material reality that is unique to our era: namely, that unlimited economic growth is assumed to be evidence of human progress. We have taken this notion so much for granted over the past few generations that it is as immutably fixed in our consciousness as the sanctity of property itself.

Growth is, in fact, almost synonymous with the market economy that prevails today. That fact finds its clearest expression in the marketplace maxim, "Grow or die." We live in a competitive world in which rivalry is a law of economic life; profit, a social as well as personal desideratum; limit or restraint, an archaism; and the commodity, a substitute for the traditional medium for establishing economic relationships-namely, the gift.

It's not enough, however, to blame our environmental problems on the obsession with growth. A system of deeply entrenched structures-of which growth is merely a surface manifestation-makes up our society. These structures are beyond moral control, much as the flow of adrenaline is beyond the control of a frightened creature This system has, in effect, the commanding quality of natural law.

In a national or international market society (be it of the corporate kind found in the West or the bureaucratic kind found in the East), competition itself generates a need for growth. Growth is each enterprise's defense against the threat of absorption by a rival. Moral issues have no bearing on this compelling adversarial relationship. To the extent that a market economy becomes so pervasive that it turns society itself into a marketplace-a vast shopping mall-it dictates the moral parameters of-human life and makes growth synonymous with personal as well as social progress. One's personality, love life, income, or body of beliefs, no less than an enterprise, must grow or die.

This market society seems to have obliterated from most people's memory another world that once placed limits on growth, stressed cooperation over competition, and valued the gift as a bond of human solidarity. In that remote world, the market was marginal to a domestic or "natural" society and trading communities existedmerely in the "interstices" of the premarket world, to use Marx's appropriate words.

Today, a rather naive liberal language legitimates a condition we already take as much for granted as the air we breathe: "healthy" growth, "free" competition, and "rugged" individualism-euphemisms that every insecure society adopts to transform its more predatory attributes into virtues. "It's business, not personal, Sonny!" as the Godfather's consigliere says after the family patriarch has been pumped full of bullets by his Mafia rivals. Thus are all personal values reduced to entreprenerinal ones.

It has been dawning on the First World, which is rapidly using up many of its resources, that growth is eating away the biosphere at a pace unprecedented in human history. Deforestation from acid rain, itself a product of fossil fuel combustion, is matched or even exceeded by the systematic burning that is cleaning vast rain forests. The destruction of the ozone layer, we are beginning to learn, is occurring almost everywhere, not just in Antarctica.

We now sense that unlimited growth is literally recycling the complex organic products of natural evolution into the simple mineral constituents of the Earth at the dawn of life billions of years ago. Soil that was in the making for millennia is being tunned into sand; richly forested regions filled with complex life-forms are being reduced to barren moonscapes; rivers, lakes, and even vast oceanic regions are becoming noxious and lethal sewers, radio nuclides, together with an endless and ever-increasing array of toxicants, are invading the air we breathe, the water we drink, and almost every food item on the dinner table. Not even sealed, air-conditioned, and sanitized offices are immune to this poisonous deluge.

Growth is only the most immediate cause of this pushing back of the evolutionary clock to a more primordial and mineralized world. And calling for "limits to growth" is merely the first step toward bringing the magnitude of our environmental problems under public purview. Unless growth is traced to its basic source-competition in a grow-or-die market society-the demand for controlling growth is meaningless as well as unattainable. We can no more arrest growth while leaving the market intact than we can arrest egoism while leaving rivalry intact.

In this hidden world of cause-and-effect, the environmental movement and the public stand at a crossroads. Is growth a product of "consumerism" -the most socially acceptable and socially neutral explanation that we usually encounter in discussions of environmental deterioration? Or does growth occur because of the nature of production for a market economy? To a certain extent, we can say. both. But the overall reality of a market economy is that consumer demand for a new product rarely occurs spontaneously, nor is its consumption guided purely by personal considerations.

Today, demand is created not by consumers but by producers-specifically, by enterprises called advertising agencies that use a host of techniques to manipulate public taste. Amencan washing and drying machines, for example, are all but constructed to be used communally-and they are communally used in many apartment buildings. Their privatization in homes, where they stand idle most of the time, is a result of advertising ingenuity.

One can survey the entire landscape of typical "consumer" items and find many other examples of the irrational consumption of products by individuals and small families-"consumer" items that readily lend themselves to public use.

Another popular explanation of the environmental crisis is population increase. This

argument would be more compelling if it could be shown that countries with the largest rates of population increase are the largest consumers of energy, raw material, or even food. But such correlations are notoriously false. Often mere density of population is equated with overpopulation in a given country or region. Such arguments, commonly cynical in their use of graphics-scenes of congested New York City streets and subway stations during rush hours, for example-hardly deserve serious notice.

We have yet to determine how many people the planet can sustain without complete ecological disruption. The data are far from conclusive, but they are surely highly biased-generally along economic, racial, and social lines. Demography is far from a science, out it is a notorious political weapon whose abuse has disastrously claimed the lives of millions over the course of the century.

Finally, "industrial society," to use a genteel euphemism for capitalism, has also become an easy explanation for the environmental ills that afflict our time. But a blissful ignorance clouds the fact that several centunes ago, much of England's forest land, including Robin Hood's legendary haunts, was deforested by the crude axes of rural proletarians to produce charcoal for a technologically simple metallurgical economy and to clear land for profitable sheep runs. This occurred long before the Industrial Revolution.

Technology may magnify a problem or even accelerate its effects. But with or without a "technological imagination" (to use Jacques Ellul's expression), rarely does it produce the problem itself. Indeed, the rationalization of work by means of assembly-line techniques goes back to such patently pre-industrial societies as the pyramid-builders of ancient Egypt, who developed a vast human machine to build temples and mausoleums.

To take growth out of its proper social context is to distort and privatize the problem. It is inaccurate and unfair to coerce people into believing that they are personally responsible for present-day ecological dangers because they consume too much or proliferate too readily.

This privatization of the environmental crisis, like New Age cults that focus on personal problems rather than on social dislocations, has reduced many environmental movements to utter ineffectiveness and threatens to diminish their credibility with the public. If "simple living" and militant recycling are the main solutions to the environmental casts, the crisis will certainly continue and intensify.

Ironically, many ordinary people and their families cannot afford to live "simply." It is a demanding enterprise when one considers the costliness of "simple" hand-crafted artifacts and the exorbitant price of organic and "recycled" goods. Moreover, what the "production end" of the environmental crisis cannot sell to the "consumption end," it will certainly sell to the military. General Electric enjoys considerable eminence not only for its refrigerators but also for its Gatling guns. This shadowy side of the environmental

problem-military production-can only be ignored by attaining an ecological airheadedness so vacuous as to defy description.

Public concern for the environment cannot be addressed by placing the blame on growth without spelling out the causes of growth. Nor can an explanation be exhausted by citing "consumerism" while ignoring the sinister role played by rival producers in shaping public taste and guiding public purchasing power. Aside from the costs involved, most people quite rightly do not want to "live simply." They do not want to diminish their freedom to travel or their access to culture, or to scale down needs that often serve to enrich human personality and sensitivity.

Rambunctious as certain "radical" environmentalist slogans like BACK TO THE PLEISTOCENE! (a slogan of the Earth First! group) may sound, they are no less degrading and depersonalizing than the technocratic utopias issued by H.G. Wells early in this century.

It will take a high degree of sensitivity and reflection-attributes that are fostered by the consumption of such items as books, art works, and music-to gain an understanding of what one ultimately needs and does not need to be a truly fulfilled person. Without such people in sufficient numbers to challenge the destruction of the planet, the environmental movement will be as superficial in the future as it is ineffectual today.

The issue of growth, then, can be used either to deliver us over to banalities about our consumption patterns and technocratic passion for gadgetry (Buddhism, I note, has not rendered Japan less technocratic than the United States) or to guide public thinking to the basic issues that bring the social sources of the ecological crisis into clear focus.

In Vermont, for example, Left Greens who are seeking to radicalize the state's rather tepid environmental movement have followed the logic of diminished growth along challenging and useful lines. In their demand for a year-long moratorium on growth and a public discussion of vital needs, they have made it possible to ask key questions about the problems raised by growth control.

By what criteria are we to determine what constitutes needless growth, for example, and what is needful growth? Who will make this decision-state agencies, town meetings, alliances among towns on a countywide basis, neighborhoods in cities?

To what extent should municipalities be empowered to limit growth? Should they begin to buy open land? Should they subsidize farmers to save farms for future generations? Should they bring major industrial and commercial concerns under the control of citizen assemblies? Should they establish legal criteria to determine ecologically sound restrictions on developers and venture-capital investors?

This sequence of questions, each of which logically follows from the idea of controlling growth, can have impressive consequences.

It has forced people in Vermont communities to think through the nature of their



priorities: growth or a decent environment? Centralized or local power? Community alliances or bureaucratic agencies? The exploitative use of property that involves the public welfare or the communal control of such property?

A number of Vermont towns have challenged the right of the state government in Montpelier to disregard the demands of citizens and town meetings to inhibit growth-indeed, to ignore their attempts to determine their own destiny.

New Age environmentalism and conventional environmentalism that place limits on serious, in-depth ecological thinking have been increasingly replaced by social ecology that explores the economic and institutional factors that enter into the environmental crisis.

In the context of this more mature discourse, the Valdez oil spill is no longer seen as an Alaskan matter, an "episode" in the geography of pollution. Rather it is recognized as a social act that raises such "accidents" to the level of systemic problems-rooted not in consumerism, technological advance, and population growth but in an irrational system of production, an abuse of technology by a grow-or-die economy, and the demographics of poverty and wealth. Ecological dislocation
cannot be separated from social dislocations.